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ABSTRACT

This brief paper indicates three strategies that can be used by child care program directors to promote staff development. The first strategy involves the organization of community school-age child care programs into associations and support groups. The second strategy emphasizes the direct, frank and honest discussion of issues between the director and the center staff. The third strategy is to hire an outside consultant or mediator to reduce staff dependence on the program director. The importance of formally recorded progress reports, work evaluations, standards, job descriptions, and policy statements which are clear and explicit is indicated. Inservice education is seen as the most viable and flexible opportunity for staff training. The ability to mold a staff development program to the characteristics of a child-care program is also seen as an important key to successful staff development. (Author/RH)

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Staff Development: Models and Roadblocks

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What exactly is staff development? The answer that comes first to mind is training, particularly training which expands a staff person's teaching skills. While training must be recognized as an important part of staff development, it is only one component of a larger concept that encompasses personal and professional development through a variety of means. The breadth of this concept became clear to me recently, when I conducted an informal survey of the staff of school-age programs in the Boston area. Only a few staff members defined staff development simply as training. Most offered a global definition which embraced aspects of staff relations, communications, personal growth, and interactions with parents, children, and community. Every aspect of child care operations was in fact viewed as a potential topic for staff development.

However, while all the teachers and directors interviewed expressed the belief that a dedicated, enthusiastic, creative and supportive staff was the key factor in producing a high quality school-age child care program, few had developed any formal or systematic arrangements for conducting or evaluating staff development and progress. In fact, in most of the programs, particularly the smaller and more recently established ones, staff development was reported to be casual and informal. Many of the directors commented that it occurred more as a by-product of other activities than as anything planned.

Those who seek to design and implement staff development efforts will find that the research available is limited and seldom directed to the needs of a school-age child care program. School-age day care is a new and developing profession with few academic studies or training resources to support it. Most of the relevant material and information on this topic is specific to other types of child care programs, particularly pre-school, residential, institutional and hospital child care. Consequently, much of the available information is useful only insofar as it can be adapted to the environment of the school-age child care program.

We can, of course, consider this situation from a more positive point of view. The novice status of our profession makes possible -- indeed encourages -- creative and innovative approaches to planning and testing which are born of the experiences, ideas and resources of the people currently involved in the provision of this service.

Some of the approaches being used in school-age programs, and the advantages and problems they involve, are described below.

A Definition of Staff Development

Staff development, broadly defined, is the dynamic process of personal and professional growth by which staff members, individually and collectively, acquire new skills and knowledge of themselves, one another, their clients and their profession. This knowledge, when directed and applied, will improve the work environment, staff relations and the quality of the child care service.

Though this definition appears formal and theoretical, it is based on a very practical goal: to improve the quality and delivery of services to the child. It emphasizes that learning and development affect the staff in both a personal and professional way. It reflects the idea that learning may occur on an individual or collective level, depending upon how new information is introduced.

A staff, of course, is comprised of individuals at varying stages of personal and professional development and with various talents. These individuals are drawn together by a common concern for the goals and activities of school-age child care. The assumption of this basic common goal is fundamental to any staff development effort.

The Role of the Leader

The preceding definition of staff development demands a type of leader who can channel the spirit and talents of each individual staff person into a cooperatively functioning team. By demonstrating respect for each of the staff members, impartially assessing their strengths and weaknesses, and soliciting their participation, opinions and ideas, the team leader is able to establish the dialogue and respect that are the foundations for staff development.

Furthermore, by granting appropriate autonomy to the staff to develop new and exciting approaches to the education and care of the children, the team leader demonstrates that he or she truly respects the staff person as a valuable professional member of the team. With this type of team spirit, a group leader is able to encourage the staff to assess their own progress and to recognize for themselves the need for continuing self improvement and staff development.

Thus a truly effective leader will recognize that his or her supervisory responsibility includes not only providing guidance, support and direction to the staff, but also the responsibility of insuring that communications and respect amongst staff members is on-going as they advance toward their common goal of good quality child care.

Effective leadership may prove difficult for directors and head teachers in school-age child care programs, for a number of reasons. First, very few directors have had specific training in school-age child care, and many feel that a lack of special academic training diminishes their "authority" and "expertise." This problem may be compounded by the fact that most directors are relatively new on the job. Few have had more than one or two years' experience as directors or supervisors. Very often, another source of difficulty is the similarity in ages between the director and the

staff. While this may encourage bonds of friendship between them, it may also lead to role conflict for the director. A final difficulty is the fact that many directors double as head teachers and co-workers in the classroom. These directors often feel additional pressures to demonstrate for their staff the "best" school-age teacher role model possible.

Faced with these difficulties, how can a director/supervisor effectively and confidently assume the responsibilities of staff development? From our local survey, three strategies emerge for reducing the conflicts inherent in the role.

Forming Associations. The first option involves organizing school-age child care programs in a community to form associations and support groups. Collectively, these programs may be financially able to support and design training sessions which address both the common and the individual concerns of several local school-age programs. In some instances, these associations have been able to offer courses at minimal costs, occasionally for college credit, by calling upon local, state and federal children's agencies for additional financial, political, educational and organizational assistance. For example, some agencies and colleges offering Title XX training classes have been willing to provide courses geared to school-age child care issues. This has not been easy, however. As noted earlier, not only is there a dearth of school-age child care information, but there are relatively few colleges and equally few resource persons familiar with school-age concerns.

Some associations, therefore, have called upon their members to lead mini-workshops on subjects or activities in which they are especially talented or well trained. Teachers, directors, parents, and community resource persons have offered workshops, each from two to three hours long on a bi-monthly basis. Some topics have included first aid training, CPR, photography, science for the school-age child, drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, international cooking, and the role of teachers in rearing the school-age child. Such workshops help to support professional development in this field from within the ranks of practitioners.

Besides addressing training issues, day care associations and support groups have also dealt with staff relation concerns. When staff from many programs are involved, issues such as administrative and teaching roles, program obligations, supervision, evaluation and personnel heirarchy can be discussed in a professional, supportive and non-threatening environment. By joining such forums, program staff have discovered that other programs face similar problems and that together they can benefit from their mutual support and experience.

Encouraging Staff Communications. The second approach to resolving conflicts in the leadership role is to encourage direct, frank and honest discussions of issues between the director/head teacher and the staff. By airing their concerns, real or imagined, and by sharing the ways in which they affect different individuals, the staff can often come to respect and understand each other better. Ongoing, open communication is extremely important. For this reason, directors who are primarily administrators, with limited amounts of time to spend in the classroom, should schedule

frequent individual conferences with each staff member. The agenda for these conferences may be open. Sometimes specific evaluations and comments on performance are a chief priority. At other times a teacher's perspective on how things are proceeding in the classroom may head the list. Sometimes, just personal discussion of each other's interests, goals and experiences is the most valuable use of the time.

Hiring Consultants. The third option for reducing dependence on the leader involves turning to an outside consultant or mediator. Many school-age child care programs, particularly larger programs or those associated with larger social service agencies, employ staff relations specialists and/or social psychologists as consultants. If the staff relations person is respected, trained in communication techniques, and able to function as a third party mediator, this arrangement can foster discussions in a constructive, non-threatening fashion which binds, rather than separates, the staff. Because of his or her experience and third-party perspective, such a mediator often can suggest alternatives previously overlooked or not fully considered. Perhaps the most important factor here is that this person be someone who is respected and trusted by all the parties involved.

The Importance of Clear Expectations

Staff development efforts -- particularly training efforts -- are commonly based on staff evaluations (whether formal or informal). Yet many school-age programs operate without written progress reports, work evaluations, standards and job descriptions. This can place both the supervisors and the staff in a tenuous position. Without objective guidelines, there is no common base for evaluation. All school-age child care programs, whether they consist of one, two or twenty-two staff members, should provide written job descriptions, policies and evaluations for each staff person. These written policies serve as an objective basis for employment contracts; they also should be subject to revision or amendment as demanded by time, experience, and staff suggestion.

When employment expectations are made clear, agreed upon in the beginning, and updated by the staff, many potential staff relations problems can be avoided. By sharing and discussing with one another their teaching goals, expectations, and commitments, the staff and administration can plan and develop an inservice education program which supports these expectations. The sooner the staff members know and agree to these expectations, the better and more effective the training is likely to be.

Inservice Education

In school-age programs, most staff development and training efforts take the form of informal discussions and opportunities to express personal feelings, fears, and observations. Formal staff development efforts generally include on-the-job training and supervision supplemented by inservice education. Associations and workshops, as noted earlier, may supplement or stimulate the course of inservice education. They should not, however, be seen as substitutes for it. Indeed, inservice education offers the most viable and flexible opportunity for staff training since it deals with the concerns and issues specifically pertinent to the program and staff.

Staff meetings appear to be the most common arena for providing in-service education as well as for setting priorities and discussing and evaluating program operations. Supportive supervision, timely personal evaluation and cooperative team-teaching appear to be the most common means of helping staff members to put this education into effective action.

Finding the time for inservice education and staff meetings is a common problem for school-age programs. This is particularly true for the newer programs, which generally have to struggle every minute just to keep the program operating. For some programs, evening staff meetings held either at the center or at a staff member's home with a pot-luck dinner are a workable solution. Other programs hold staff meetings before the children arrive, although this can prove difficult for those staff members who need to supplement their part-time salaries by holding additional jobs in the mornings.

Some programs, in an effort to solve this problem, have gone so far as to extend their services to include preschool and/or kindergarten child care. This expansion enables the programs to offer their staff additional work hours and correspondingly higher salaries. In addition, the extended hours and preschool service permit these programs to hold staff meetings and inservice education classes during nap or rest period when only one or two people are necessary to supervise the nap room. Some programs recruit a volunteer to cover this short period of time while others have developed a system for rotating coverage by staff members.

Responsibility for leading staff meetings may be shared in various ways. In some programs, the staff first meet collectively to define the topics of concern; then, on a rotating basis, individual staff members assume the responsibility of researching a specific issue and presenting their findings to the rest of the staff. In other programs, consultants and community professionals are invited to introduce variety to staff meetings, as well as to generate excitement and expand learning. Larger child care programs often appoint educational coordinators to design and lead classes on current child care issues. Options such as these foster creative individual participation, extend opportunity for sharing and communications, permit opportunity for leadership training and focus on issues of immediate and personal concern.

Staff at many programs suggest that meetings should be balanced in content by scheduling a certain segment of time (perhaps one half hour) for discussing a predetermined general issue in school-age child care, while devoting the remainder of the meeting to discussions of individual children's needs or problems, staff relations, and programming. All staff with whom we have spoken agree that staff meetings are essential and should be held at least once a week for a minimum of 1½ hours. All agreed that staff should be paid for this time.

The ability to mold a staff development program to the characteristics of an individual child-care program is an important key to its success. Any program which provides staff members with opportunities for personal growth and gains in knowledge and skills, and which helps to improve the quality of child care services, is well on the way to success.